

ANTE-ANTI-BLACKNESS: AFTERTHOUGHTS [1]

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In his article, "Theory in Black," Lewis Gordon writes the following:

Theory in black...is...a phobogenic designation. It occasions anxiety of thought; it is theory in jeopardy. [...] There is a form of illicit seeing...at the very beginnings of seeing black, which makes a designation of seeing in black, theorizing, that is, in black, more than oxymoronic. It has the mythopoetics of sin. [...] Blackness, in all its metaphors and historical submergence, reaches out to theory, then, as theory split from itself. It is the dark side of theory, which, in the end, is none other than *theory itself*, understood as self-reflective, outside itself (Gordon 2010: 196-8).

I am guided in the following task by a two-sided idea derived from Gordon's arguments: 1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies. Blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory. I suspect that this premise might help us to re-frame questions of theory in cultural studies by referring to - or forging - another criterion of evaluation. The pedagogical thrust of this comment emerges from recurrent questions arising from my undergraduate teaching in the Program in African American Studies and my graduate teaching in the Culture and Theory Ph.D. Program and the Critical Theory Emphasis at the University of California, Irvine, and from research conducted for a recent Social Text article entitled, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery" (2010). The questions, though they have been around for some time now, remain relatively young in the historic instance: Are there multiple forms or species of racism or simply variations of a fundamental structure? If it is the latter, what provides the model or matrix (colonialism, slavery, anti-Semitism)? Or is racism, rather, a singular history of violent conjunctures? [2] Can anti-racist politics be approached in ways that denaturalize the color line, retain the specificities of discrepant histories of racialization, and think through their relational formation? "People-of-Color-Blindness" serves as an initial response to such questions and a sort of extended preface to my comments below. There I attempted to examine the re-figuration of slavery and its afterlife [3] within the field of black studies, paying special attention to the theoretical status of the concept of "social death" since its introduction by Orlando Patterson in his synthetic 1982 study, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard UP). For Patterson, the social death of slavery is comprised of three basic elements: 1) total powerlessness, 2) natal alienation or "the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations" (Patterson 1982: 7), and 3) generalized dishonor, this last element being a direct effect of the previous two. Adjudicating the explanatory power of Patterson's *magnum opus*, then, bears on matters of political and social theory (i.e., power), law (i.e., right) and philosophy (i.e., ontology, epistemology and ethics) as much as history and historiography (i.e., the archive and the question of writing). So, aside from acknowledging the veritable explosion in social, cultural, economic and geographic histories of slavery in the last twenty years, [4] the latter and more specific focus of this comment involves an exploration of the emergent tension between the formulations of "afro-pessimism" and "black optimism" offered respectively in Frank B. Wilderson's 2010 *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Duke UP) and Fred Moten's recent series of articles in the journals *Criticism* ("The Case of Blackness" 50:2 [2009]), *PMLA* ("Black Ops" 123:5 [2008]), and *CR: The New Centennial Review* ("Knowledge of Freedom" 4:2 [2005]). The

wager here is that the details of what might seem at first to be a highly technical dispute in a small corner of the American academy will reveal themselves to be [illuminating comments on the guiding assumptions and operative terms of the field of black studies](#) particularly and the range of cultural studies more generally, both in and beyond the United States.

For Wilderson, afro-pessimism takes seriously the *longue durée* of social death in Atlantic history and thereby pursues an investigation of "the meaning of Blackness not - in the first instance - as a variously and unconsciously interpellated *identity* or as a conscious social actor [animated by legible political interests], but as a structural *position* of non-communicability in the face of all other positions" (Wilderson 2010: 58, emphasis added).

Wilderson's procedure here is something like the abstraction of a conceptual framework (regarding structural positionality), a methodology (regarding paradigmatic analysis) and a structure of feeling (regarding the politics of antagonism) that, taken together, remain implicit in the work of various luminaries of black studies but whose full implications only become available when they are rendered explicit and raised to another level of theorization.

[5] Moten, in his turn, forwards a notion of black optimism drawn from his longstanding meditation on the relation between black politics and black musical performance and this notion is meant, in part, to counter or reposition the premises of afro-pessimism by holding the force of black agency to be logically and ontologically *prior* to the construction of a social order characterized by anti-blackness - "the resistance that *constitutes* constraint," as he phrases it elsewhere. [6] I think it important that the shifting line of distinction progressively marked out between the theoretical tendencies I have just sketched turns in crucial ways on their real or imagined ability to think about what Wilderson calls "the political ontology of race" not only alongside and through a history of capitalism and the emergence of the modern nation-state, [7] but also with respect to formations of gender and sexuality as mutually constituting categories of differentiation. [8] We are dealing here with both [the challenges of analytical description and the desire for political prescription](#).

The productive friction at the heart of this endeavor, generating equal parts heat and light, was already evident throughout the two-day symposium I organized in 2006 at the University of California, Irvine. That gathering, entitled "Black Thought in the Age of Terror," brought together some of the most prominent voices in black studies to comment on a range of issues that each understood to be of significance for the field in the early twenty-first century. [9] In that venue, it became clear that any claim about the contemporary persistence of black social death for an analysis of the afterlife of slavery would have to contend with the insistence of black social life, and vice versa. Put somewhat differently, something more complicated was afoot than the oft-noted dialectic of slavery and freedom, or power and resistance, something like an intimacy of the two terms that arrayed them less as opposites and more as conditions of an impossible possibility.

In fact, this theoretical problematic reaches back quite a bit further, at least to Moten's critical engagement with Saidiya Hartman's landmark text, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford UP, 1997), first in his 1999 book review for the journal *TDR: The Drama Review* and then again in 2003 in the opening pages of his first major work, *In the Break* (Duke UP). Since then, this critical engagement has been extended further by Daphne Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent* (Duke UP, 2006) and by Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls* (Duke UP, 2008), for instance, but one might understand this massive and often convoluted exchange as bound up in an even more profound contest over the proper reading of the entire *oeuvre* of Hortense Spillers, the leading theoretical figure in the field of critical black studies over the last thirty years. That is also to say that it is a question of the most basic political and intellectual *orientation* of black feminism, the ground wire of black studies as such, in the post-civil rights era and beyond. The upshot of this meditation lies in the collective opportunity to revisit and revise Giorgio Agamben's grand urging in his *Means without Ends* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000) to "abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political" in order to "build our political philosophy anew"

(16). It is hoped that in our pursuit of this renewal of categories of thought in and through the history of racial slavery, we might better apprehend the prospects for a future of freedom and justice to come.

In "The Case of Blackness," Moten is concerned with a strife internal to the field formation of black studies, internal, moreover, to the black (radical) tradition [10] that black studies is or seeks out as institutional inscription, a "strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms" that he argues, persuasively, "is essential not only to contemporary black academic discourse but also to the discourses of the barbershop, the beauty shop, and the bookstore" (Moten 2008: 178). Put slightly differently, there is a strife within the black (radical) tradition between "radicalism (here understood as the performance of a general critique of the proper)" and a "normative striving against the grain of the very radicalism from which the desire for norms is derived" (Moten 2008: 177). [11] If radicalism gives rise to the desire for norms, like a river from source water or a tree from roots, if the general critique of the proper gives rise to the desire for propriety (in the fullest sense of the term) and not vice versa, then our prevailing notion of critique – and the forms and sources of our critical activity – is put profoundly into question, and, I think, rightly so. It would mean, at the very least, that we could not, as Nahum Chandler ably demonstrates, analytically presuppose "the system in which the subordination takes place," in this case the system of racial slavery, and then insert the subjects or objects of that system "into this pre-established matrix to engage in their functional articulation of the permutations prescribed therein" (Chandler 2000: 261). Instead, we would have to account for "the *constitution* of general system or structure" and not just its *operational* dynamics (ibid, emphasis added). [12] Moten finds examples of this prevailing notion of critique in a certain moment of Fanon and, consequently, in a citation and elaboration or resonance of Fanon in a 2003 article, "Raw Life," that I co-authored with Huey Copeland for the journal *Qui Parle* (Sexton & Copeland 2003). There are other references in Moten's piece, less perceptible, to an interview with Saidiya Hartman conducted by Frank B. Wilderson, III for the same issue under the title, "The Position of the Unthought" (Hartman 2003). There are references, by extension, to Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and to Wilderson's *Red, White and Black* (2008), as well as to some of the sources that the latter draws upon in his own formulation: Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight* (2007), David Marriott's *On Black Men* (2000), Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001). All of these works are addressed to the extent that they are said to share "an epistemological consensus broad enough to include Fanon, on the one hand, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, on the other – encompassing formulations that might be said not only to characterize but also to initiate and continually re-initialize the philosophy of the human sciences." (Moten 2008: 188). [13] That's curious company, of course, but that's precisely the point.

In the same vein, and based on a reading "raw life" as a synonym rather than an opening toward another frame of reference, Moten rails against what he sees in "a certain American reception of Agamben" as a "critical obsession with bare life" that "fetishizes the bareness of it all" (Moten 2008: 216 fn. 6). [14] What is unattended or forgotten in this "constant repetition of bare life," which is how Moten reads this troubled and troubling reading of Fanon *avec* Agamben, is an engagement with Agamben's (affirmative) notion of "form of life." And here one is unfaithful to the best of Agamben if one's theorization "separates life from the form of life," just as one is unfaithful to the best of Foucault if one overlooks his "constant and unconcealed assumptions of life's fugitivity" in support of a mistaken conviction that misattributes to the great French historian and political philosopher a thesis about the absoluteness of power (ibid). What links these two observations – a strife internal to black studies and a failure in the understanding of power – is a relation of mutual implication. A central point of "The Case of Blackness" obtains in a caution against and a correction of the tendency to depart from the faulty premise of black pathology and thereby carry along the discourse being criticized within the assumptions of the critique. If one misunderstands the nature of power in this way, then one will more than likely assume or, at least, agree to the pathology of blackness and vice versa. Chandler might identify this entanglement less with a problem of attitude and more with an error

of judgment. Wilderson's concurrence with the spirit of this gambit would, in turn, warn against the tendency to "fortify and extend the interlocutory life of widely accepted political common sense" and its theoretical underpinnings (Wilderson 2008: 36).

However, before we adjudicate whether the authors of "Raw Life" or the dossier of articles that it introduces or, for that matter, Fanon himself truly suffer from "an explicatory velocity that threatens to abolish the distance between, which is also to say the nearness of" a whole range of conceptual pairs requiring a finer attunement to "their difference and its modalities" (Moten 2008: 182); I think it paramount to adjudicate whether the fact that "blackness has been associated with a certain sense of decay" is, in the first instance, something that we ought to strain against as it strains against us. And even if, in the last instance, we decide to stay the course, need we mobilize a philosophy of life in order to do so? To interrogate "the racial discourses of life philosophy" is to demonstrate that the question of life cannot be pried apart from that thorniest of problems: "the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought," that dubious and doubtless "fact of blackness," or what I will call, in yet another register, the social life of social death. [15] This is as much an inquiry about the nature of nature as it is about the politics of nature and the nature of politics; in other words, it is meta-political no less than it is meta-physical. The question that remains is whether a politics that affirms (social) life can avoid the thanatological dead end if it does not will its own (social) death. David Marriott might call this, with Fanon, "the need to affirm affirmation through negation...not as a moral imperative...but as a psychopolitical necessity" (Marriott 2007: 273 fn. 9). [16]

As noted, Patterson first developed the concept in question for an academic audience in his encyclopedic 1982 survey, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, and surprisingly little elaboration followed in the wake of his intellectual contribution and the minor controversy it spurred. That debate, played out in the pages of book reviews and, sometime thereafter, in passing references to the earlier work in scholarly articles and books, generally invoked a caricature of the concept as already debunked. Not that there isn't much in Patterson to worry about, especially if one were interested to examine how aspects of the neoliberalism he would eventually come to embrace are embedded in prototypical form in his *magnum opus* and in earlier writings from before the commencement of the Reagan/Bush era proper. Consider, on this score, comments by V.P. Franklin (at this writing President's Chair and Distinguished Professor of History and Education at the University of California, Riverside) in his review for the *Journal of Negro History*:

The large gap in our knowledge of global slavery "from the perspective of the dominated" still needs to be filled. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* provides us with a great deal of information on the legal status of slaves and freedpeople from ancient times to the present, but his lack of knowledge of ancient and modern languages and his dependence upon secondary sources limits the value of the work for researchers who have moved beyond "the World the Slaveholders Made" to an analysis of what it was like "To Be A Slave." And his inadequate and outdated discussion of slave life and culture in this country makes the work of questionable value to historians and social scientists interested in the Afro-American experience in the United States (Franklin 1983: 215-6).

The negative estimation is two-fold: on the one hand, Patterson is unable and uninterested in writing history from the perspective of the dominated (which is a way of saying that he is unable and uninterested in writing history *for* the dominated); on the other, Patterson nonetheless takes the liberty of speaking about the dominated and the result is travesty. Franklin draws up a review article Patterson penned for the pages of *The New Republic*, while at work on the study that would become *Slavery and Social Death*, in order to establish in Patterson an acute condescension toward the career of the African American in the United States that may suggest something about the conceptual framework more generally. In registering

profound disagreement with one of the principal arguments of Eugene Genovese's Bancroft Award-winning 1974 study, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Patterson denounces the "Afro-American cultural system" as a "limited creed - indulgently pedestrian and immediate in its concerns, lacking in prophetic idealism, a total betrayal of the profound eschatology and heroic ideals of their African ancestors" (quoted in *ibid*: 215). Patterson goes on: "It was not a heritage to be passed on. Like their moral compromises, this was a social adaptation with no potential for change, a total adjustment to the demands of plantation life and the authoritarian dictates of the masters" (*ibid*). And the fatal blow: "A people, to deserve the respect of their descendents, must do more than merely survive spiritually and physically. There is no intrinsic value in survival, no virtue in the reflexes of the cornered rat" (*ibid*). Though I've been called worse, one can understand with little effort why an eminent scholar writing in the *Journal of Negro History* (Franklin, incidentally, is now Editor of the renamed *Journal of African American History*) might chafe against the suggestion that the masthead of said academic venue contained an oxymoron. We will call Patterson's verdict here an instance of the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of analysis, insofar as that analysis posits the presupposition of its object. One might think, with Franklin, that a shift in perspective from slaveholder to slave slips the knot of the hermeneutic circle. But the question of the constitution of the system (or whole), Chandler reminds us above, is also the question of the constitution of those subjects or objects (or parts) whose functional distribution plots the operations of the system.

Whereas Patterson's detractors take to task his historical sociology for its inability and unwillingness to fully countenance the agency of the perspective and self-predicating activity of the slave, his supporters (or those engaging his work through generous critique) do not fail to remark, even if they rarely highlight, that what is most stunning is the fact that the concept of social death cannot be generalized. It is indexed to slavery and it does not travel. That is, there are problems in the formulation of the relation of power from which slavery arises and there are problems in the formulation of the relation of this relation of power to other relations of power. This split reading was evident immediately, as indicated in a contemporaneous review by Ross K. Baker. Baker observes, against the neoconservative backlash politics of "angry white males" and the ascendance of another racialized immigration discourse alternating, *post*-civil rights, between model minority and barbarians at the gate: "The mere *fact* of slavery makes black Americans different. No amount of tortured logic could permit the analogy to be drawn between a former slave population and an immigrant population, no matter how low-flung the latter group. Indeed, had the Great Society programs persisted at their highest levels until today, it is doubtful that the mass of American blacks would be measurably better off than they are now" (Baker 1983: 21). Baker's refusal of analogy in the wake of his reading of Patterson is pegged to a certain realization "brought home," as he puts it, "by the daunting force of Patterson's description of the bleak totality of the slave experience" (*ibid*). I want to hold onto this perhaps unwitting distinction that Baker draws between the mere fact of slavery, on the one hand, and the daunting force of description of the slave *experience*, on the other. In this distinction, Baker echoes both the problem identified by Moten in his reading of my co-authored piece as a certain conflation of the fact of blackness with the lived experience of the black (Moten 2008: 179) and the problem identified by Hartman as a certain conflation of witness and spectator before the scenes of subjection at the heart of slavery (Hartman 1997: 4). I concede that Moten's delineation is precise (though its pertinence is in doubt) and that it encourages a more sophisticated theoretical practice, but Hartman's conclusion, it seems to me, is also accurate in a sort of non-contradictory coincidence or overlap with Moten that situates black studies in a relation field that is still generally under-theorized. Rather than approaching (the theorization of) social death and (the theorization of) social life as an "either/or" proposition, then, why not attempt to think them as a matter of "both/and"? Why not articulate them through the supplementary logic of the copula? In fact, there might be a more radical rethinking available yet.

In recent years, social death has emerged from a period of latency as a notion useful for the critical theory of racial slavery as a matrix of social, political, and economic relations

surviving the era of abolition in the nineteenth century, "a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago." This "afterlife of slavery," as Saidiya Hartman terms it, challenges practitioners in the field to question the prevailing understanding of a post-emancipation society and to revisit the most basic questions about the structural conditions of anti-blackness in the modern world. To ask what it means to speak of "the tragic continuity between slavery and freedom" or "the incomplete nature of emancipation", indeed to speak of about a type of living on that survives after a type of death. For Wilderson, the principal implication of slavery's afterlife is to warrant an intellectual disposition of "afro-pessimism," a qualification and a complication of the assumptive logic of black cultural studies in general and black performance studies in particular, a disposition that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way. This critical move has been misconstrued as a negation of the agency of black performance, or even a denial of black social life, and a number of scholars have reasserted the earlier assumptive logic in a gesture that hypostatizes afro-pessimism to that end. [17]

What I find most intriguing about the timbre of the argument of "The Case of Blackness" and the black optimism it articulates against a certain construal of afro-pessimism is the way that it works away from a discourse of black pathology only to swerve right back into it as an ascription to those found to be taking up and holding themselves in "the stance of the pathologist" in relation to black folks. [18] I say this not only because there is, in this version of events, a recourse to psychoanalytic terminology ("fetishization," "obsession," "repetition,"), but also because there is at the heart of the matter a rhetorical question that establishes both the bad advice of a wild analysis and a tacit diagnosis affording a certain speaker's benefit: "So why is it repressed?" The "it" that has been afflicted by the psychopathology of obsessional neurosis is the understanding, which is also to say the celebration, of the ontological priority or previousness of blackness relative to the anti-blackness that establishes itself against it, a priority or previousness that is also termed "knowledge of freedom" or, pace Chandler, comprehension of "the constitutive force of the African American subject(s)" (Chandler 2000: 261).

What does not occur here is a consideration of the possibility that something might be unfolding in the project or projections of afro-pessimism "knowing full well the danger of a kind of negative reification" associated with its analytical claims to the paradigmatic (Moten 2004: 279). That is to say, it might just be the case that an object lesson in the phenomenology of the thing is a gratuity that folds a new encounter into older habits of thought through a re-inscription of (black) pathology that reassigns its cause and relocates its source without ever really getting inside it. [19] In a way, what we're talking about relates not to a disagreement about "unthought positions" (and their de-formation) but to a disagreement, or discrepancy, about "unthought dispositions" (and their in-formation). I would maintain this insofar as the misrecognition at work in the reading of that motley crew listed in the ninth footnote regards, perhaps ironically, the performative dimension or signifying aspect of a "generalized impropriety" so improper as to appear as the same old propriety returning through the back door. [20] Without sufficient consideration of the gap between statement and enunciation here, to say nothing of quaint notions like context or audience or historical conjuncture, the discourse of afro-pessimism, even as it approaches otherwise important questions, can only seem like a "tragically neurotic" instance of "certain discourse on the relation between blackness and death" (Moten 2007: 9). [21]

Fanon and his interlocutors, or what appear rather as his fateful adherents, would seem to have a problem embracing black social life because they never really come to believe in it, because they cannot acknowledge the social life from which they speak and of which they speak - as negation and impossibility - as their own (Moten 2008: 192). Another way of putting this might be to say that they are caught in a performative contradiction enabled by disavowal. I wonder, however, whether things are even this clear in Fanon and the readings his writing might facilitate. Lewis Gordon's sustained engagement with Fanon finds him situated in an ethical

stance grounded in the affirmation of blackness in the historic anti-black world. In a response to the discourse of multiracialism emergent in the late twentieth-century United States, for instance, Gordon writes, following Fanon, that "there is no way to reject the thesis that there is something wrong with being black beyond the willingness to 'be' black - not in terms of convenient fads of playing blackness, but in paying the costs of anti-blackness on a global scale. Against the raceless credo, then, racism cannot be rejected without a dialectic in which humanity experiences a blackened world" (Gordon 1997: 67). What is this willingness to 'be' black, of choosing to be black affirmatively rather than reluctantly, that Gordon finds as the key ethical moment in Fanon?

Elsewhere, in a discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois on the study of black folk, Gordon restates an existential phenomenological conception of the anti-black world developed across his first several books: "Blacks here suffer the phobogenic reality posed by the spirit of racial seriousness. In effect, they more than symbolize or signify various social pathologies - they become them. In our anti-black world, blacks are pathology" (Gordon 2000: 87). This conception would seem to support to Moten's contention that even much radical black studies scholarship sustains the association of blackness with a certain sense of decay and thereby fortifies and extends the interlocutory life of widely accepted political common sense. In fact, it would seem that Gordon deepens the already problematic association to the level of identity. And yet, this is precisely what Gordon argues is the value and insight of Fanon: he fully accepts the definition of himself as pathological as it is imposed by a world that knows itself through that imposition, rather than remaining in a reactive stance that insists on the heterogeneity between a self and an imago originating in culture. Though it may appear counter-intuitive, or rather because it is counter-intuitive, this acceptance or affirmation is active; it is a willing or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the anti-black world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, life, or sociality. Fanon writes in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*: "A Senegalese who learns Creole to pass for Antillean is a case of alienation. The Antilleans who make a mockery out of him are lacking in judgment" (Fanon 2008: 21). In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black non-existence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative - "above all, don't be black" (Gordon 1997: 63) - in this world, the zero degree of transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that "resides in the idea that 'I am thought of as less than human'" (Nyong'o 2002: 389). [22] In this we might create a transvaluation of pathology itself, something like an embrace of pathology without pathos. To speak of black social life *and* black social death, black social life *against* black social death, black social life as black social death, black social life in black social death - all of this is to find oneself in the midst of an argument that is also a profound agreement, an agreement that takes shape in (between) *meconnaissance* and (dis)belief. Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afro-pessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by vitalizing it.

A living death is as much a death as it is a living. Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor - the modern world system. [23] Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. This is agreed. That is to say, what Moten asserts against afro-pessimism is a point already affirmed by afro-pessimism, is, in fact, one of the most polemical dimensions of afro-pessimism as a project: namely, that black life is not social, or rather that black life is *lived* in social death. Double emphasis, on lived and on death. That's the whole point of the

enterprise at some level. It is all about the implications of this agreed upon point where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed.

Wilderson's is an analysis of the law in its operation as "police power and racial prerogative both under and after slavery" (Wagner 2009: 243). So too is Moten's analysis, at least that just-less-than-half of the intellectual labor committed to the object of black studies as critique of (the anti-blackness of) Western civilization. But Moten is just that much more interested in how black social life steals away or escapes from the law, how it frustrates the police power and, in so doing, calls that very policing into being in the first place. The policing of black freedom, then, is aimed less at its dreaded prospect, apocalyptic rhetoric notwithstanding, than at its irreducible precedence. The logical and ontological priority of the unorthodox self-predicating activity of blackness, the "improvisatory exteriority" or "improvisational immanence" that blackness is, renders the law dependent upon what it polices. This is not the noble agency of resistance. It is a reticence or reluctance that we might not know if it were not pushing back, so long as we know that this pushing back is really a pushing forward. So, in this perverse sense, black social death is black social life. The object of black studies is the aim of black studies. The most radical negation of the anti-black world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world. Afro-pessimism is "not but nothing other than" black optimism. [24]

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RESPONSE TO JARED SEXTON'S "ANTE-ANTI-BLACKNESS: AFTERTHOUGHTS"

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"Black memory is often at odds with state memory."

Michael Hanchard

*"The function of the curriculum is to structure what we call
'consciousness,' and therefore certain behaviors and attitudes."*

Sylvia Wynter, Proud/Flesh Interview with Sylvia Wynter

Jared Sexton's generative article "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" addresses critical issues facing Black Studies today and he begins from the place of understanding that "blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory." In my response I take up some of those threads and move in two hopefully related directions both of which are opened up by the work.

The first direction is one in which I briefly think through the state of black studies at my own university and in the second I think through Sexton's understanding of black social life in, under, and as black social death in relation to my ongoing engagement with the work of the Black Trinidadian Canadian lesbian novelist, poet, activist, theorist Dionne Brand.

For some people in and outside of the U. S. academy black studies is, still, the antithesis of theory, the antithesis of thinking. To juxtapose black and studies is to (still) join (in thinking) the un-thinkable. I am writing this response in the midst of ongoing struggles at my own university about whether, how, in what form to institute Africana Studies and whether that institutionalization will take the shape of an established major, a program with a major, or a department with a major. This struggle feels old but also strangely new and possibly generative in the kinds of questions it poses, the kinds of questions that might be asked, and the kinds of answers that might be given at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. What is black studies (now)? What is the object of black studies (now)? What is the state of black studies (now)? Why (do you want) black studies (or Africana studies) (now)? What use black studies (now) in the current university? Should there (still) be some standalone thing called Africana Studies/Black Studies or should this work locate itself within something broadly conceived of as Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity? Or alternately should this work be located under some variety of a methodological critical analytical umbrella? Occupying the same time/space as the struggle over how the set of knowledges and practices gathered under Black or Africana Studies will be organized and not specific to my institutional residence is the struggle in and around and over what used to be or may still be called Women's Studies. In that instance of knowledge and curricular restructuring, sometimes "women" still appears in the title as in some form of "Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies," but often these interdisciplinary units are now called some form of Gender Studies or Gender and Sexuality studies. My point here is not so much to lament that change (though we might want to) as to ask why Women's Studies and, in particular, the *word* women embraced so belatedly are now turned away from so quickly in the name of something else under which "women" can be one category of what is thought? In other words, at the very least this change and these struggles signal that rather than possibly being seen as generative theoretically capacious terms by those who would locate their scholarship and teaching there, rather than being centers from and through which one can understand the workings

of power and the worlds we inhabit and are riven and inhabited by, it is imagined (now) that much or most can't be thought, theorized, or imagined under the sign of Women or Black (or Africana).

That tension is evident in the series of questions that Sexton asks and that he identifies as arising out of his research, his institutional context, and the undergraduate and graduate courses that he teaches. Questions that: "though they have been around for some time now, remain relatively young in the historic instance: Are there multiple forms or species of racism or simply variations of a fundamental structure? If it is the latter, what provides the model or matrix (colonialism, slavery, anti-Semitism)? Or is racism, rather, a singular history of violent conjunctures? Can anti-racist politics be approached in ways that denaturalize the color line, retain the specificities of discrepant histories of racialization, and think through their relational formation?" I add two additional questions that arise out of my own institutional context and that are at least one strand of the impetus behind sustained, multi-year student organizing for the various intellectual enterprises that constitute black studies: Will the fact of black studies ameliorate the quotidian experiences of terror in black lives lived in an anti-black world? And, if not, what will be the relationship between the two?

Sexton's remarks in "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts" are a response to and they predate and extend a conversation with a 2006 symposium he organized at University of California, Irvine called *Black Thought in the Age of Terror*. This work continues his ongoing, rigorous conversation and engagement with the works of Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, Lewis Gordon, Frank Wilderson II, David Marriott and others in the field of black studies and, especially and in particular, with their study of the ongoing effects of slavery, its 'afterlife' (Hartman 2007). In laying out the tensions between "afro-pessimism" and "black optimism," Sexton is thinking the afterlife of slavery across the fields of cultural studies and comparative race and ethnic studies alongside the struggle that might seem to be internal to the field of black studies. He "wagers" (the ante) "that the details of what might seem at first to be a highly technical dispute in a small corner of the American academy will reveal themselves to be illuminating comments on the guiding assumptions and operative terms of the field of black studies particularly and the range of cultural studies more generally, both in and beyond the United States" (Sexton "Ante-Anti"). That is, he wagers that really contending with the figure of the slave('s life and death) will shift foundationally what we presume to know about slavery and its extending and extensive worlds.

Sexton makes clear that the critical insistence on the existence of black social life would have to be contended with amidst claims on and claims of the continuing relevance and persistence of black social death and vice-versa. But as this work also makes clear the existence of black social life in all of its modalities does not alter the fact of black social death. That black life is not recognized as life (or life lived) on the order of other lives. (This articulation is adjacent to Sylvia Wynter's theorizing in relation to both "race" and "gender" as "genre" which is another way to speak about the human (non black) and the anti-human (black) (See Wynter ProudFlesh, 2003).

What, then, is the relationship of the *ante* to anti-blackness: is it one of time (priority) or position (before or in front of), a wager, a demand to pay (up) or a marker of the stakes, the risk, the cost (and benefits) of anti-blackness? All of the above? The both/and instead of the either/or? It seems to me that it is the both-ness or perhaps the all-ness of those relationships that is the pivot (the copula) at the heart of Sexton's Ante-Anti-Blackness. The hyphens mark a not irresolvable distinction and they are a holding at bay, a horizontalization of relations, a holding on to, *and* a setting out of the question (of indisputable black suffering and the straining against it) that is the "agreed upon point where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed" (Sexton "Ante-Anti"). And it is this tremendous capacity to think together, to draw out the often overlooked and passed over, to hold in tension, and then to advance a careful and ethical argument that I find so very useful and necessary about

Sexton's work. His work in this and other articles, as well as in *Amalgamation Schemes*, has opened up and made possible certain spaces for and lines of re/thinking in and in relation to my own work. It is work that insistently speaks what is being constituted as the unspeakable and enacts an **ethical embrace of what is constituted as (affirmatively) unembraceable**.

The Door and the ontology of blackness

"I think it [*A Map to the Door of No Return*] asks a fundamental question, which is not just a question for me or for Africans in the Diaspora, *but the question of being. How existence is constructed for you.*"

Dionne Brand interview with Maya Mavjee. "Opening the Door: An Interview with Dionne Brand" (emphasis mine).

As I think about Jared Sexton's work and what his intensive line of theorizing of anti/blackness opens up for me I turn back to Dionne Brand and, in particular, to her 2001 work *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. At the center of that work, Brand's meditation on the black body and questions of belonging and her understanding that "the frame of the doorway is the only space of true existence" (18), is a desire to account for the no/place, power, vulnerability, and the complex materiality of the body raced as black. It is a desire produced in the wake of the door of no return, that "collective phrase for the places, the ports, where slaves were taken to be brought to the Americas" (Mavjee "An Interview with Dionne Brand," 2001). *A Map to the Door* begins with "A Circumstantial Account of a State of Things," as it records the narrator's attempt to reckon with a series of circumstances and silences historical and personal that stand in the place of a record of how she has come to be and live in the place she is—Guayaguayare, Trinidad. At thirteen years old, the narrator tries to will her grandfather into remembering what he cannot remember and what he refuses to lie about—the name of the "people they came from." Instead of a name that would stand in for an account, the adolescent Brand encounters a lacuna and what is unnamed and unremembered signifies "a tear in the world," and "a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being" that is nevertheless productive of new modes of (not) being and (not) seeing (Brand 2001, 5). For Brand "the door of no return is on her retina" as an optic that guides her way of seeing, understanding, and accounting for her place in the world (Brand 2001, 89).

The door signifies the historical moment which colours all moments in the Diaspora. It accounts for the ways we observe and are observed as people, whether it's through the lens of social injustice or the lens of human accomplishments. The door exists as an absence. A thing in fact which we do not know about, a place we do not know. Yet it exists as the ground we walk. Every gesture our body makes somehow gestures toward this door. What interests me primarily is probing the Door of No Return as consciousness. The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora. Black experience in any modern city or town in the Americas is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. All human effort seems to emanate from this door. How do I know this? Only by self-observation, only by looking. Only by feeling. Only by being a part, sitting in the room with history (Dionne Brand 2001, 24-25).

When Brand writes this she locates the real and mythic door of no return as an optic and a haunting that continues to construct and position black people in the "new world." For Brand that un/known door is the frame that produces black bodies as signifiers of enslavement and its (unseeable) excesses; it is the beginning, the ontology, of the black. It is the ground that

positions black bodies to bear the burden of that signification, and that positions some black people to know and embrace it. This is, Brand's work powerfully exemplifies Sexton's extension of Gordon's reading of Fanon's acceptance of himself defined as pathological "by a world that knows itself through that imposition." An acceptance that "though it may appear counter-intuitive, or rather because it is counter-intuitive, ... is active; it is a willing or willingness, in other words, to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the anti-black world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to **health, life, or sociality**" (Sexton "Ante-Anti").

Put another way, this is the modality in which Brand's works work so powerfully: the modality of exploring the various and varied black lives lived under occupation, the modality of black (social) life lived in, as, under, in spite of black (social) death. I read Brand alongside Sexton as mapping and creating a language for thinking, for articulating black (social) life lived alongside, under, and in the midst of the ordinary and extraordinary terror of enforced black social death.

Brand's work reaches toward a language of longing but not belonging, toward a language that expresses what it is to be subjected and to live through subjection. And part of the reason that I've returned to Brand again and again and to the body of Sexton's work is because of her, their, ability to stand looking at the door and to build a language that, despite the rewards and enticements to do otherwise, refuses to refuse blackness, that embraces "without pathos" that which is constructed and defined as pathology (Sexton "Ante-Anti").

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